

Collective Peer Teaching : An Influential Strategy to Improve Learning in EFL Classes

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Abstract

Traditional instructor-centered classes don't engage EFL students in class activities, diminish learning in the classroom and fail to address social and emotional needs of students who are failing to learn in the classroom so learning is not satisfactory. As the result of this problem, teachers should consider a better way for teaching in their classes. As an important alternative, collective peer teaching is an effective way to increase student engagement and participation, facilitating a warm and interactive classroom environment. For creating such an environment, a peer teacher uses diverse teaching methods focusing on personal interaction and relational activities specific to their age group. Considering these points, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the effects of collective peer teaching on EFL students' learning regarding engagement, power relationships, changes to the students' sense of belonging, and increasing metacognition. The results can serve as information source for EFL teachers on the benefits of collective peer teaching to increase learning efficiency.

Keywords: Collective, Peer teaching, Peer teacher, Engagement, EFL teachers

Introduction

Traditional instructor-centered classes don't engage EFL students in class activities, diminish learning in the classroom and fail to address social and emotional needs of students who are failing to learn in the classroom (Reyes & Villareal, 2016), so learning is not satisfactory. In traditional educational settings, students are not afforded a chance to develop self-confidence and other personal attributes such as metacognition/self-reflection, self-regulation, autonomy, and oral fluency. Many students are unable to learn in traditional settings but gain self-confidence and develop creativity in a peer-teaching environment (Zhanova, Rule, & Stichter, 2013). As the result of this problem, teachers should consider a better way for teaching in their classes. As an important alternative, collective peer teaching is an effective way to increase student engagement and participation, facilitating a warm and interactive classroom environment (Velvez et al, 2011). For creating such an environment, a peer teacher uses diverse teaching methods focusing on personal interaction and relational activities specific to their age group.

An effective peer-teaching instructional approach, under the umbrella of a Project Based Learning (PBL) environment, allows diverse students of different race, color, gender, and social class opportunities to not only learn content, but also develop 21st Century work skills in our democratic society ("K12 Thoughtful learning," 2017) (Corral, J., 2018). Topping (2005) views collective peer-teaching as an instructional approach that builds self-confidence and provides a pathway to reconnecting with our students by bringing rigor, expectations and relationships into the classroom resulting in student growth.

Collective peer teaching has numerous advantages that are pointed out by different scholars. According to Nieto (2013), having implemented a peer-teaching in EFL classes will result in growth and development in student self-regulation, metacognition/self-reflection and autonomy. Also, Peers working together can bring their social skills into the classroom and connect their experiences or knowledge to new subject content. Also, students are given the necessary resources, and emotional support to help them understand subject content, and to prepare and teach their peers. This approach allows the teacher-researcher to use differentiated instruction by taking on the role of a mentor, coach and facilitator in a peer-learning classroom. The teacher creates an environment, in which students' uniqueness are important as the traits they share, assesses their presentations through formative assessments, and plans the peer-learning experience, held together by common goals (Doubet, & Hockett, 2015).

Considering these points, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the effects of collective peer teaching on EFL students' learning regarding engagement, power relationships, changes to the students' sense of belonging, and increasing metacognition. Therefore, the following question was answered :

- How can collective peer teaching affect EFL learners' learning?

The findings can serve as information source for EFL teachers on the benefits of collective peer teaching to increase learning efficiency. Also, policy makers, theorists, language organizers, material designers, educational programs originators, and learners can increase their mindfulness of collective peer teaching.

EFL learners' engagement and participation

The most important benefit of peer teaching is increasing engagement and participation in class activities. The overall peer teaching environment facilitated student interaction, which allowed students to assume the role of active participant. Students laugh, talk and interact throughout the lessons, creating a warm and interactive atmosphere. In these classes, both peer teachers and class participants appreciated the dynamic involvement associated with peer teaching. The students contrasted the dynamic, active involvement of the peer teaching process with the lack of engagement they had experienced in other courses. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) stated that, "Peer interactions, particularly those that extend and reinforce what happens in the academic program, appear to influence positively knowledge acquisition and academic skill development during college".

Power Relationships

The second positive point about peer teaching is power relationships and classroom roles between peer teachers, students, and the course instructor. The researchers identified a palpable change in the classroom dynamics once peer teachers assumed leadership. The peer teachers' relationship with the class appeared to be active and vibrant. There was an evident power dynamic between peer teachers and student participants. Peer teachers appeared to assume the role of power when they felt they could affect a positive or influential change in student beliefs or opinions. The peer teachers persisted in asking direct questions until the student expressed doubt in his own views. It seemed as if the peer teachers assumed power and were unwilling to allow the offending student to remain in a state of metacognitive quandary (Velvez et al, 2011)..

Changes to the students' sense of belonging

The third advantage of peer teaching is changes to the students' sense of belonging because peer teachers were almost gentler with their peers, more forgiving of mistakes, and warmer in their interactions. These affective elements of communication, while inherently subtle, nevertheless pointed towards an apparent increased sense of communality or belonging. The researchers noted that the peer teachers were, comfortable with pushing peers and yet showed care and concern for their fellows. One distinct indicator of belonging was the level of student physical contact. In most instructor-led college courses, physical contact with students is both minimized and discouraged. The peer teachers, on the other hand, repeatedly engaged in physical contact coupled with verbal praise. The researcher notes indicated that peer teachers, "tended to touch one another and pat on the back," and engaged in verbal praise with comments such as "you are special," "that's a good question," and "you can do it." The physical contact displayed by the peer teachers was a tangible and visible representation of the sense of belonging exhibited during the peer teaching process.

Increasing metacognition

Participants seemed to enjoy both peer teaching and being taught by peers. The overall peer teaching environment facilitated student interaction, which allowed students to assume the role of active participant. Students laughed, talked and interacted throughout the lessons, creating a warm and interactive atmosphere. Students who engaged in active peer teaching displayed elements of metacognition. The students analyzed their own learning supported by statements such as, "I'd rather teach than learn," and, "I learn more when I teach." Through metacognition, the peer teachers also began to develop an awareness of their individual

and collective learning styles. In their reflections, the peer teachers commented: "...we could have improved on that. Kind of thinking about their teaching style as well as the content that they [peer teachers] are teaching;" "...we decided that it would be better to get the information to them first, and then proceed to have them apply it."

The peer teachers also demonstrated a psychological introspective aspect of self-reflection: "I was highly disappointed in myself."; "I was very pleased and I feel that my partners felt the same." Students who engaged in peer teaching also reflected on the value of observation and the ability to learn from others. The peers who taught first felt they were disadvantaged by not being able to solicit peer feedback, garner ideas and improve their teaching: "I know at least with our group, since we were the first ones to go we really felt like the guinea pigs because we weren't sure what to expect"; "It was a pretty obvious benefit for the other groups, the later groups, they hear the comments at the end from all the groups that have gone, on what to improve on."

Conclusion

A peer-teaching instructional approach used in the classroom promotes the skills and personal attributes necessary to become a productive and competitive learner. Peer-teaching is much like Project Based Learning, applying integrated curriculum along with subject content (Markham, 2012). Peer-teaching cuts across disciplines. Students are critical thinkers, problem solvers, active learners, independent learners, and researchers (Schramm-Pate, 2016).

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